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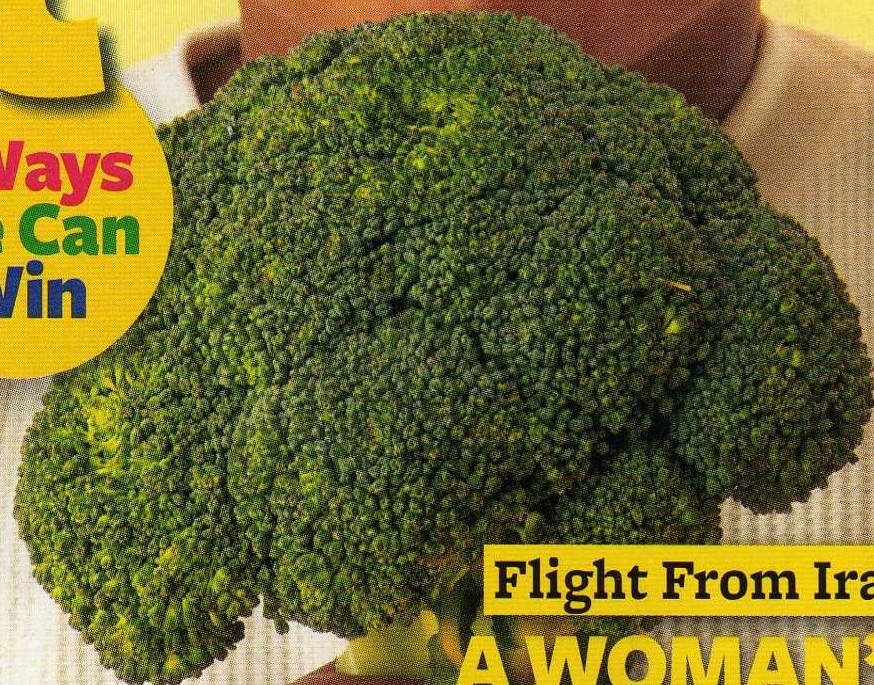
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Fabrizio Riccardi,
2000: "*Las llamas
en la noche infinita*"
(The Flames in the
Endless Night).

TOWN of Painted Doors

How a medieval Italian town raised itself from the dead

BY STEVE BURGESS



Perched on the western tip of the Italian Riviera and flanked by the Mediterranean, the tiny hill town of Valloria is a vision of pastoral splendour. In recent decades, the ravages of modern tourism had not affected it.

But like most small towns, Valloria had a problem: Its young people kept leaving. Angelo Balestra was one of them. He left Valloria to look for work in the big city, and eventually settled in Milan to pursue a career in advertising.

The pull to visit family back home was strong, but he soon came to dread his weekend trips to see his mother. "It broke my heart," Balestra says. "In the village that once counted hundreds of inhabitants, only 30 very old people were left. No shops—nothing. And everything was breaking or falling down—the old church roof, the traditional olive mills, the streets...."

Valloria wasn't the only place where this was happening. The surrounding green hills are topped by their own clinging villages, all of them medieval sites of drystone houses and narrow streets, which were struggling to find a niche in the new tourist-driven economy. Balestra



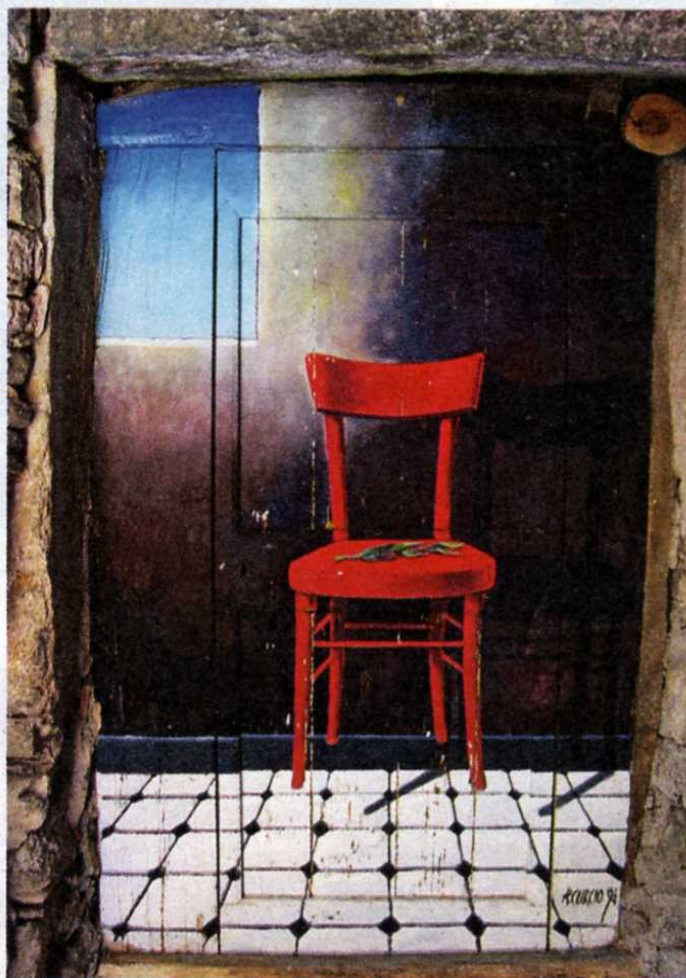
(PAGE 103 AND PAGE 104, TOP) IMAGEBROKER/ALAMY; (BOTTOM) ALAIN VAN DE MAELE

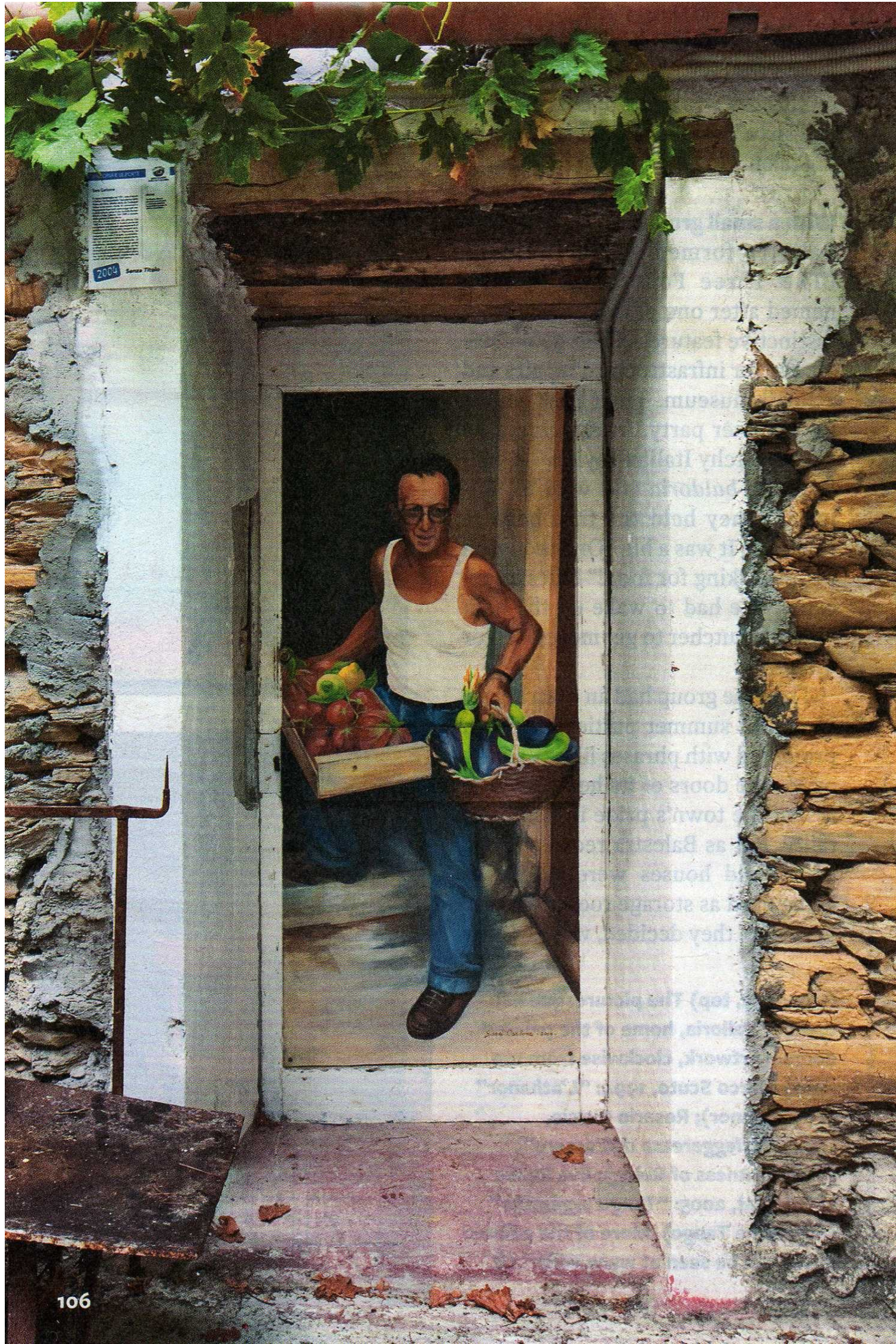
feared the consequences—"I thought our history was going to fade away"—and so he decided to put his advertising talents to work.

With a small group of fellow alumni, Balestra formed Le Tre Fontane (The Three Fountains) in 1991, named after one of the town's most distinctive features. Their goal: raise money for infrastructure repairs and a small museum. Their first plan: a big summer party. After coming up with a catchy Italian rhyme—*A Valloria, fai baldoria* (Go wild in Valloria)—they held the first bash in July 1992. It was a hit. "One thousand people asking for food!" Balestra recalls. "We had to wake up the next village's butcher to get more beef for the grill."

Then the group had an even bigger idea. The summer parties had been promoted with phrases like "Valloria opens the doors of its heart" to represent the town's pride in its hospitality. But as Balestra recalls, "Most of the old houses were empty or being used as storage rooms." So the next step, they decided, was not only

(Opposite, top) The picturesque hill town of Valloria, home of the painted doors. (Artwork, clockwise from top right) Marco Scuto, 1994: "*L'athanor*" (The Athanor); Rosario Curcio, 1994: "*La leggerezza dell'essere*" (The Lightness of Being); Eva Raabe Lindenblat, 2005: "*Tango argentino*" (Argentine Tango). More of the painted doors can be seen at www.valloria.it.





to open the doors, but to hand them over to artists—in other words, to turn the town into an open-air art gallery.

Valloria was thus reborn as Italy's Town of Painted Doors. Painted villages are an Italian tradition—they even have their own society (Associazione Italiana Paesi Dipinti). But while most villages are decorated according to a theme, Valloria took a different approach. Painters were given complete artistic freedom.

The first door-painting event was set for the first weekend of July 1994. “At first it was just word of mouth,” Balestra says. “We invited artists from the area, and also from Milan and Turin, because there were former Vallorians living there.”

Eighteen doors were painted that first year. They ranged from Marcello Bonomi's “Madonna and Child” to Rosario Curcio's *trompe l'oeil* rendering of a red chair hovering in a white-tiled room (page 105). Professional illustrator Marco Scuto created a portrait of a man floating, Mary Poppins-like, with an umbrella in one hand and a tire pump in the other (page 105).

Fabrizio Riccardi, an artist from Turin, created another local favourite. His painting (page 103) shows a shocked nun, her hand covering her mouth, looking through a recessed

“Senza titolo” (Untitled) is a spectacular *trompe l'oeil* by Sara Carbone, painted in 2004.

window in the doorway. In front of her, painted onto an actual windowsill, are two copulating lizards. Riccardi's image captures the sense of fun and freedom that has drawn artists from as far away as Switzerland, Germany, Ireland and the United States. Once word began to spread in the artistic community, requests to paint a door in Valloria started pouring in.

To date, 122 portals have been painted. Supply is limited. “Now there are few available doors; we can't offer more than six or seven every year,” Balestra frets. “We reached 30 requests last summer. We had to say no many times.”

“No one is paid,” says Florence-trained painter Alessandra Puppo, “but it is a big honour to participate in the renewed life of this beautiful old village.”

Micheline Croteau came all the way from New Hampshire. She contacted Balestra after finding the doors of Valloria on the Internet, and received an invitation. “My experience in Valloria was wonderful,” she says. “The people of the village came to look at my painting while I was working, especially the children.”

Croteau's painting, “Origami for Peace,” featured paper cranes. “I had such a great time at the festival, I returned the year after with friends and relatives,” she says. When she did, Croteau got a pleasant surprise. “My door had become an interactive piece,” she recalls. “Other people had

made drawings of origami cranes on the door and signed them.”

Along with the July door-painting party, Valloria is also famous for its other summer event: the annual August feast. “Everything is cooked by Valloria people,” says Maria Bietolini, an advertising colleague of Balestra’s who worked on the town’s publicity campaign. “The young ones help as waiters, running all night to serve a thousand people on tables spread over the hill, under the olive trees. The menu offers traditional recipes from the area. Even wine and liquors are from small producers in the valley.”

In some ways Valloria has hardly changed. It is still a sleepy little place. The permanent population, which had dropped from several hundred to a low of 30, now hovers at around 40. But that is deceptive. Many former

residents have bought and refurbished summer residences, which are often rented to tourists—some of whom have even bought their own summer homes. Valloria now boasts four new *agriturismi*, or country bed-and-breakfast spots. One member of the Tre Fontane group quit his job as a plumber and opened up a successful restaurant, La Porta dei Saponi (The Door to Flavours).

“In the late ’90s, when I painted my door, the village had only 30 very old people,” Puppo says, “without any jobs for young people, who escaped far away. Now the old people have been joined by young relations.”

And among the town’s new residents is none other than Angelo Balestra himself. “I chose to leave Milan and come back after my retirement,” he says. “I’m so happy I did. Now this is really a place worth living in.”

Online

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DOUBLE TALK

While at a water park, my four-year-old son and I were sitting on a bench eating ice cream. I had on a pink-and-black-striped swimsuit.

A very beautiful young woman with a gorgeous figure walked by, and she happened to be wearing a similar suit. My son looked at her, then at me. “Look, Mom!” he said. “That lady has on a swimsuit just like yours, only hers is a different shape.”

Kim Mercer

After watching me fuss with my naturally curly hair, my young niece affectionately told me, “Your hair is so pretty—it’s like a river.” Then she reached up and added, “And here are the rapids.”

Fran Clabaugh